

HUNGARY'S JEWRY FACES LIQUIDATION

Again the Concentration Camps

BÉLA FABIAN

"STALIN will succeed where Hitler failed: he will finally wipe out the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe," came the warnings from my friends behind the Iron Curtain in 1949. "If the West does not intervene in time, the Communists will deport the remaining Jews of Eastern Europe to the slave camps of Asia."

To the best of my powers I tried to communicate this message to American Jews. But just as in 1942, when reports smuggled out of Auschwitz and Warsaw fell on uncomprehending ears in the West, these new reports were received with disbelief. They were too fantastic. Today, there can hardly be any question that they were sober truth. The Jewish community of Budapest, which had in large part survived Nazi occupation, thanks to forceful intervention by the King of Sweden and President Roosevelt at a time when Hungarian Jewry was being shipped off en masse to Auschwitz, will soon cease to exist: the community leaders, political leaders of Jewish origin, lawyers, doctors, writers, and intellectuals, former businessmen, manufacturers, and shopkeepers, even

many workers and Communists—thousands have been shipped off eastward, to camps in northeast Hungary, or beyond to the Soviet Union. Only the pressure of world opinion and Western government action stands between them and complete liquidation—and the hour is very late. However incredible the story, the facts are indisputable, and we can no longer turn our eyes away from them.

IN OCTOBER 1948 the first rumors of new dangers threatening the Jews of Hungary began to circulate in Budapest. At that time, there were about 150,000 Jews in Hungary, two-thirds of them in Budapest. They had suffered terribly in common with all other middle-class elements; but perhaps even more terribly because they included many aged people who found it difficult or impossible to seek new occupations. The new rumors spoke of instructions from Moscow calling for the removal of Jews from government offices and the dissolution of Jewish organizations; and they called for a further onslaught on the economic position of Jews, and their elimination from economic life.

The leaders of Hungarian Jewry, who then still had excellent connections with circles close to the government, tried in vain to get definite information; but what they heard led more and more of them to join the stream of illegal immigrants who at the time found it possible to slip out of the country without too great difficulty.

There seemed no doubt, these informed Jews believed, that a new wave of restrictions and attacks on Jews was to begin, though there was no apparent motivation for it. All that could be said was that it seemed to be an extension of the anti-Semitic policies which became evident in the Soviet Union in 1948, and whose main impulse seemed to be fear of the "international" and "cosmo-

ALARMING reports have been coming out of Hungary in recent months about large-scale deportations of "undesirables"—about 50 per cent of whom turn out to be Jewish—to the slave labor camps of the Soviet Union. BÉLA FABIAN, former president of the Hungarian Independent Democratic party and for seventeen years a member of the Hungarian parliament, here summarizes and analyzes the reports, both published and unpublished, which add up to a picture of mass terror hardly surpassed by the record of the Nazis themselves, and in many respects frighteningly similar to their program of liquidation on racial lines. An earlier article by Dr. Fabian, "Hungary's and Rumania's Nazis-in-Red" (May 1951), revealed the important role played by "reconstructed" Nazis in Eastern Europe's newest "new order."

politan" orientation of Russian Jews, even after twenty-five years of isolation from world Jewry. When Golda Meyerson arrived in Moscow in the summer of 1948 as Israel's envoy, a large number of Moscow Jews had demonstrated before her hotel. Spontaneous public demonstrations are unheard of in Russia, and it is known that this one aroused the concern of the authorities. Shortly afterwards, the first violent attacks on "Jewish chauvinism" followed; the Politburo had apparently become doubtful of the single-minded devotion of Russia's Jews to the regime.

While events and policy changes in Russia, let alone the motivations of its rulers, remain shrouded in darkness, the same cannot be true of countries like Hungary. With such a large postwar emigration of Jews, including many communal leaders, from the country, it was impossible for any major development affecting the Jewish community to be completely hidden from the outer world for long.

At first the Jews of Hungary were in some confusion as to whether to ascribe the misfortunes of 1948 to an intensification of the existing official policy of "liquidating the bourgeoisie" or to a new official anti-Semitism. In any case, the confiscation of privately owned business, which had begun with large-scale enterprise, now reached the level of small wholesale business, and as an increasing number of Jews were made destitute, the atmosphere of violent attacks on "Zionism" intensified. After many deliberations, the Budapest Jewish community decided to request an audience with the Premier, Matyas Rákosi. Rákosi received the delegation February 7, 1949.

"We are here to discuss the following vital problems," a member of the delegation said: "The rapid decline of city Jews to beggary; the growing hostility of the Hungarian Communist party to the Jews, whether or not they are party members; the government's new policy toward Zionism and against the emigration of Jews to Israel."

Enraged, Rákosi accused the Jews of disloyalty, and threatened that their condition

would grow worse, not better: "The government will shortly dissolve by a stroke of the pen all Zionist recruiting offices, schools, organizations, denominational and nationalist underground movements. We shall tolerate no longer the Zionist machinations in Hungary. Minister of the Interior Kádár will remove the illness of the Hungarian Jews by an operation." A similar justification of the increased misery to be visited on the Jews was formulated in an address of the Councillor of the Ministry of Welfare, Réthi, to a meeting of the Jewish community of Budapest. "No wonder the regime distrusts the Jews," he declared, after attacking the ingratitude of Jews who wished to emigrate. "Until the Nazis invaded Hungary in 1944, Hungarian Jews were well treated, and up to the Nazi invasion Hungary gave refuge to the persecuted Jews of Hitler's satellite countries. . . . You cannot divide your loyalty between Hungary and Israel."

THE attack on the Jews became more clearly political, and its anti-Jewish nature more apparent. By the end of 1949, 1,721 retail stores had been nationalized (confiscated), 1,504 of which belonged to Jews. Of 491 buildings confiscated, 383 belonged to Jews. In 1948 and 1949, 648 lawyers were listed in the official gazette as disbarred on political grounds: 439 were Jews. Hundreds of Jewish businessmen and intellectuals who had lost their sources of livelihood were arrested for "vagrancy" and sent to the concentration camp of Kistarcsa. Almost all the Jewish employees of the Ministries of Industry and Reconstruction, which were headed, respectively, by Istvan Kossa and Josef Darvas, both of whom have anti-Semitic records, were fired. Between May and December 1949, 310 Communist party section leaders and other functionaries were ousted in various purges: of them 209 were Jews and 47 converted Jews. However, some measure of illegal emigration of East European Jews to Israel through Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, continued. During a period of some months beginning November 1948, the Hungarian government took no notice of

the transports. Then at the end of July 1949, the Hungarian secret police demanded that the Czechoslovak authorities return a group of escaping Jews. The Czechoslovak authorities complied; and violent fighting occurred between the emigrants and the frontier guards.

Finally, the illegal emigration was stopped completely in October 1949. At the same time, discussions on emigration which were being held between the Israeli minister and the Hungarian government resulted in an agreement with the Israeli representative that 3,000 Jews in certain special categories would be allowed to emigrate legally. However, even those who left under this limited agreement met many obstacles, and were required to pay large sums.

After the Rákosi conference all Zionist bodies had been dissolved. Now, at the beginning of 1950, the remaining Jewish organizations of Hungary of no matter what description and character were *gleichgeschaltet* into a single Jewish organization under the community's leader, Lajos Stockler—presumably under the totalitarian principle that it is easier to watch, or lop off, one head than many.

The Jewish community, bound, destitute, and cut off from emigration, now awaited the last stage in the tragedy. It was not long in coming.

ON NOVEMBER 5, 1950, visitors to the Kistarcsa camp, most of whose inmates were Jews, received a shocking surprise. The prisoners of this camp had been allowed to receive a visitor once a month, who was permitted to bring a 10-pound package. The relatives of 800 prisoners had received visiting permits for November 5. No less than 650 of the visitors were unable to find any trace of their relatives! The guards declared that they knew nothing and withheld all information. The relatives of the missing began to make inquiries at prisons and internment camps, and a few of the internees were found in the jail of Vác. The rest had simply disappeared.

At the same time, rumors circulated

throughout the country that the major part of the internees at the camp of Vésztő had also disappeared. It soon became known that the missing persons had been taken toward the East, in sealed cattle cars. These cars were traced as far as Rahó, in the Carpathian Ukraine. It was obvious that they were traveling toward Soviet Russia.

Up to this point, many Hungarians, Jews and non-Jews, had been deported to Soviet Russia, but these were political prisoners, opponents of the regime. Now, for the first time, deportation threatened those unfortunates who had committed the non-political "crime" of "vagrancy," of having lost their means of livelihood. It was reported that all those who had received prison sentences of more than two years, or were confined in internment camps for an indefinite period, were to be deported to Russia.

Soon, those who had so far escaped internment camps were threatened.

In May 1951 a wave of evictions and expulsions began in Budapest. On twenty-four hours notice, or less, anyone was liable to eviction. In a single month, nine to ten thousand Jews (together with about as many non-Jews) were removed from their homes and sent to small villages in Eastern Hungary. Panic seized Budapest Jews, as reflected by the flood of desperate letters received by Americans of Hungarian origin—over real, as well as assumed, names and addresses. For since people were now being punished for what they were—intellectuals, former businessmen and professionals, "international" Jews (without evidence of disloyalty or "international connections")—it hardly mattered what they did.

The deportations began with former dignitaries—ex-ministers, deputies, retired generals, aristocrats—but soon spread to all middle-class elements, and were carried out with complete brutality. Not individuals, but complete families were removed; and young children were taken from the deportees to be placed in institutions.* A large

*More specific information has since become available on the treatment of deportees' children in a letter to the *New York Times*, September 19,

proportion of the unfortunates were aged: yet all were required to do hard agricultural labor in the villages of Eastern Hungary to which they were sent, and to attend "educational meetings" after their day's work.

"Since the evictions began on May 16," one letter records, "the entire country is obsessed by panicky fear and despair. Nobody knows when his turn will come. Since May 16 over 2,000 persons have taken their own lives in Budapest." Another letter reports that poison can no longer be bought, even on the black market. Dated May 28, it reads: "I am unable to obtain poison and lack the courage to throw myself into the Danube. I envy the people who have sufficient strength of mind to jump from the top floor of a building or into the river. Poison is unobtainable; even the simplest drugs such as cold tablets or headache powder are not available. Those who succeed in taking their lives may be considered lucky. They at least escape the agony of death inevitable in deportation."

Hungarian Jews did not doubt their ultimate destination was Soviet Russia: "The persons evicted from Budapest are crowded into cattle cars at the suburban stations. Many police agents handle them roughly, as they did in Nazi days; others, themselves disgusted, show more compassion and often have tears in their eyes. For the time being

by Geza B. Grosschmid: "Not only are . . . boys and girls under eighteen separated from their . . . families for the purpose of re-education and for possible use . . . in time of war. It has been revealed in numerous letters smuggled out of Hungary that deported children under six are also taken from their families.

"The children are placed in so-called 'Rakosi Children's Homes' because, in the authorities' opinion, they cannot be properly cared for by their deported parents. The real purpose, however, is to . . . make them forget their origin and to train them to become fanatic Communists. There are also indications of name changes and of destruction of documents in order to cut every possible link between parent and child.

"This procedure is not a Russian invention. The Janizaries consisted at first of Christian youths who were taken to Turkey every year from their parents. . . .

"The same idea was adopted successfully by the Nazis. . . ."

the evicted persons are concentrated in camps and villages. Many camps are already full. But everyone knows these are only temporary arrangements. There are many signs pointing to deportation. So for instance, when the child of an evicted family which had to leave before the end of the school term asked the headmaster of his school for a certificate he received the curt reply: 'What for? You won't need it.' Other signs are that most of the camps are situated in the eastern part of Hungary. Furthermore, persons entirely unfit for work are also placed in such camps. The Jewish Home for the Aged and other charitable institutions have not been spared and their occupants have also been evicted. Before the Nazis began to deport their victims to the extermination camps of Poland and Germany, they, too, concentrated them first in camps inside their own country. It is to be feared that eviction is only a prelude to deportation, or that these camps are nothing but gas chambers operating at a slower speed."

WE HAVE even received messages from the villages to which the evictees have been sent: "Judging from the present conditions, we guess that we shall only stay a short time in this place and then we will be taken farther East, in silence, without any publicity. It is remarkable that there is a great number of Jews among us, from all professions and occupations; the great majority of Jews are 'class aliens.' There is also a Communist party member here who was active up to his seizure; he was taken away from his office. There is also a former state employee who has been a factory worker for five years."

"For the time being we live in a windowless shack which served formerly as a pantry, with a concrete floor. We hardly receive anything to eat, and are virtually starving. How this will end we do not know."

"While the weather remains good I can manage somehow, but I cannot imagine winter in this place. I still have hope, and hope withheld me from committing suicide.

But I do not know how long I can still feel hope."

"Eviction struck us so suddenly; we hardly had eight hours for packing our belongings. We traveled twenty-three hours in crowded cattle cars and during this whole time we were forbidden to leave the car. You can imagine the condition in which we arrived. Now they have crowded six families into this small peasant's cottage. There is only one cooking stove and no fuel. Milk is unavailable, prices are high, and we are living upon our last resources. On the same train on which we were evicted, over 600 persons were evicted from the capital. Most of them were old and there were many invalids among them."

What was the meaning of these developments? Were the deportees needed for the slave labor camps of Russia? Perhaps. But then why were so large a proportion of the deportees aged persons useless for labor? Were they being deported, as the Communist press in Hungary asserted, and as apologists in this country explained, to make room in the overcrowded capital for more "desirable" social elements? This too must have played a role. But unquestionably, one of the main reasons for the deportations was the desire to remove from Hungary, close to the border of the free world, any persons who might have any sympathy for, any connections, however tenuous, with the world beyond the Iron Curtain.

Indeed, as a worldwide clamor arose over the deportations, and the official Hungarian Communist press finally was forced in some way to acknowledge the reign of terror in Budapest, this was the explanation that could be read between the lines: *Szabad Nep* reported on July 14, 1950: "Fascists, Nazis, and previously convicted bandits have been removed from frontier territory where they had been supporting Titoist provocation and had been the allies of Titoist spies."

International protests called a halt after two months, but only temporarily. On July 15 the International Congress of Free Trade Unions, meeting in Milan, demanded UN intervention. On July 27 President Truman

announced that the United States government would "render the Hungarian government accountable before the world for its crimes." On August 1 Secretary Acheson asserted the American government was keeping full records of all those participating in the deportations. Meanwhile, the issue had been raised in the British Parliament and in the Economic and Social Council of the UN. However, on August 22, the deportations were resumed, and they continue today.

THE parallel to the policy of Nazi extermination is almost complete: the only difference is the denial that "Jews as Jews" are being mistreated, and the fact that, at the end of the line, instead of the extermination camps of Auschwitz and Treblinka, there are the slave labor camps of Karaganda and Kolyma and the cotton fields of Tashkent and Alma-Ata.

Indeed, the parallel may well be even closer. Minister Istvan Kossa, charged with the handling of ecclesiastical matters since the beginning of May 1951, is a convinced anti-Semite. Lieutenant General Laszlo Piro, charged with the supervision of deportation and of frontier control, was one of the infamous participants in the Miskolc pogrom, in 1946. For this he received a severe prison sentence in 1946. Today he is handling the technical end of deportation.

Many reports of the despairing resistance of Budapest's Jews have been received. Many Jews walked silently into the streets with the yellow stars of the Nazi occupation sewed on their clothes, in protest—the wearers were immediately seized and deported. A delegation of Budapest Jewish leaders, under Menyhért Spiegel, head of the Orthodox Jews, tried to see Rákosi, to request that survivors of the Nazi deportations be spared this new ordeal. They finally saw Ernst Gerö, the second most powerful Communist minister. Not only was their request denied—Spiegel himself, and his delegation, were deported.

With grim humor, the Communist government forced the leaders and rabbis of the community to announce to the outer world

on July 16 that no Jews were being deported "as Jews." The world did not know that 120 community leaders had been arrested on July 1 and only released after they had signed the declaration. But a gruesome footnote was soon added to it: Doctors Geza and Josef Szücs, fifty-six-year-old twin brothers who were nephews of Lajos Stockler, the leader of the Hungarian Jewish community, and who were themselves active Jewish leaders (Geza was head of Joint Distribution Committee activities, Josef was general secretary of the Jewish community organization), jumped to their death in Budapest: at the same time their aged aunt committed suicide by taking poison. Notes they had left behind were seized by the police: but we know from European sources that before their death letters from them were widely circulated in the Jewish community that made it clear they were dying, as Zigelbojm had died in London during the Warsaw uprising, to arouse the conscience of Western Jewry and the concern of the Western world. The Jewish community of Budapest planned a large public funeral for the Szücs brothers; at the last moment, the ceremony was banned by the government, and they were buried in silence. Unfortunately, heroism in totalitarian countries is muted—we do not have the messages they left, all we have is the brute fact of their suicide to serve as message.

PERHAPS 70,000 persons have already been deported, and put to forced labor under conditions which can only mean death for many of them. How many of these are Jews we do not know—perhaps half. Meanwhile, there is no sign the deportations are at an end.

Hungary—not to speak of the Jewish community—will scarcely recover from the loss of so many distinguished political and intellectual leaders. But we have already seen that repeated protest, in the gravest and most

serious terms, even from the despised Western world, has consequences in Hungary—and in other countries behind the Iron Curtain. The speed with which Communist leaders in the captive countries hasten to answer these protests testifies to their recognition of their influence; and more than once in the past they have modified their actions for fear of a similar ultimate retribution to that visited upon the Nazi criminals. We have seen how this operated in their temporary suspension of deportations after the Acheson statement in July. It must never be forgotten that the Communist puppet leaders feel themselves far more insecure in the seats of power than the Nazis did.

Some Jewish organizations have been cautious in their protest because they feel that the hundreds of thousands of Jews behind the Iron Curtain are hostages for their "good behavior." But this is thoroughly to misunderstand the situation. The Jews behind the Iron Curtain, who are surely in the best position to weigh consequences, have pleaded in no equivocal terms that their fate be broadcast to the world and protested in every possible way. This was the message the Szücs brothers hoped to send out.

Not only should general protests against Communist inhumanity be intensified; they should be backed by specific demands. First of all, the Hungarian government should be asked to allow the aged, who are obviously useless for agricultural labor, to leave the country. The Netherlands has already indicated its willingness to accept Hungarian refugees; the Israeli minister in Budapest long ago asserted that Israel would take any Jews the Hungarian government would release. If the Western world acts promptly and energetically, it may yet save many whose origins alone now doom them in Communist Hungary. If it does not, soon even the remnants that survived the Nazis, and continued the history of once great Jewish communities, will cease to exist.